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50,000 Chilean copper miners launch strike against Boric government

On Wednesday morning at midnight, 50,000 copper miners launched a strike at mines and refining facilities across Chile, in the country's first national miners' strike in 20 years.

Chile produces 10 percent of the world's copper—a critical metal required for industrial production—and its miners represent a powerful and historically militant section of the international working class. The indefinite strike is wind in the sails of a growing global movement against inequality and rising living costs, which have been exacerbated by the US/NATO war against Russia.

The strike was triggered by the unexpected announcement last Friday by the government of President Gabriel Boric that one of the country's main copper refineries, Fundición Ventanas, near Valparaiso, would be permanently closed and all its employees fired. The decision provoked mass outrage among miners and forced the Copper Workers Federation (FTC) to call a strike.

The Boric government's decision to shutter Fundición Ventanas was presented as an environmental measure on the grounds that the facility is one of the biggest air polluters in the country. In early June, emissions from the facility sickened dozens of schoolchildren near the plant. But officials at Codelco, the state-owned copper firm, said that the company could install mechanisms to block 99 percent of emissions with an investment of just \$53 million.

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While the Boric government has attempted to present the workers as hostile to protecting the environment, the workers themselves live near the facilities and made clear their demand is for the government to invest sufficient resources to protect jobs *and* lower pollution. Striking miners carried signs that read, “Environment *and* work” and “No to the closure, yes to investment.”

The struggle is an industrial rebellion against Boric and the Apruebo Dignidad (Approve Dignity) coalition, which is based on Boric’s Frente Amplio (Broad Front), the Stalinist Communist Party of Chile, and several smaller parties. Workers on the picket line in front of the Fundición Ventanas facility hanged Boric in effigy with a sign reading, “Boric: The Maximum Traitor.” Across the country, miners carried signs and hung banners over overpasses near factory gates denouncing Boric as a traitor.



Chilean President Gabriel Boric arrives to La Moneda presidential palace in Santiago, Chile, Monday, May 2, 2022. [AP Photo/Esteban Felix]

Boric was elected in November 2021 on a wave of social opposition to the right-wing policies of conservative Sebastian Piñera and social-democrat Michelle Bachelet, who alternated as president from 2006 until 2022 and oversaw endless privatization schemes that helped make Chile the most unequal country in South America. Beginning in October 2019, mass protests rocked the country, in what has become known as the *Estallido Social* (social outburst), and Boric’s candidacy marked an attempt by the Chilean ruling class to suppress social opposition with “left” demagoguery.

Boric's attack on miners' jobs has generated profound anger among copper miners against the union, the FTC, which endorsed Boric in the 2021 elections and urged miners to support his government. In a July 2021 meeting with the FTC leadership, Boric declared: "There is space in Chile for a greater distribution of wealth and the proposals of the FTC point in this direction." In the weeks before the general election, the head of the FTC told union members: "Either we compromise with him [Boric], or we go home as cowards and traitors."

The FTC bureaucrats actually managed to do both. Now, after winning the FTC's endorsement, Boric has deployed the police to arrest striking miners. A union press release Wednesday announced that several miners were arrested at their workplaces, by police acting on the orders of Codelco and the national government.

Despite this, FTC leaders announced Thursday that they were prepared to meet with the government to discuss bringing the strike to a close.

This is not the first time the Boric government has violently assaulted striking workers. In May, Boric deployed police to attack striking oil refinery workers at the Hualpén refinery 500 kilometers south of Santiago, using water cannon, pepper spray and tear gas to beat and arrest workers. The hated carabineros also brutally assaulted impoverished youth who engaged in food riots in Santiago earlier this year due to the rising cost of living.

After Boric deployed police against workers, his spokesperson and Communist Party leader Camila Vallejo declared that the government would continue with its plans to shutter the plant. At a press conference Wednesday she said, "I call for tranquility. Effectively, there are mobilizations, but I think this is not good, and I have said as much to the minister of the interior, to raise the alarm about this mobilization."

Vallejo was a spokesperson for the Chilean student protests of 2011 after being installed by the Communist Party, to which her parents also belonged. Vallejo and Boric were both leading figures in the University of Chile Student Federation, where they served to divert demonstrations against school privatization and fee hikes away from a struggle against the Chilean state and the capitalist system.

After years of generalized social protest, the upsurge against the Chilean ruling class has now reached the heart of the Chilean working class, the copper miners. Rapid inflation is making conditions exceedingly difficult for Chilean workers. Inflation hit 11.5 percent last month, the highest in 28 years. The price of diesel has increased 51 percent year-to-year, vegetable oil has increased 32 percent, chicken by 28 percent, meat by 26 percent and home energy by 20 percent.

A June study by Chile's Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL) noted that the US/NATO war against Russia in Ukraine is greatly exacerbating poverty and inequality across Latin America. Citing the study, *El Pais* wrote, "the consequences of the war in Ukraine, especially the increase in the cost of energy and food, will elevate poverty in Latin America and the Caribbean to 33.7 percent and extreme poverty to 14.9 percent this year," both substantial increases from 2021.

At the behest of US imperialism, Boric's government has supported sanctions against Russia. Boric traveled to Los Angeles for the Summit of the Americas earlier this month despite the Biden administration's decision to ban Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua from attending. The presidents of Mexico and Uruguay refused to attend the summit as a result of Biden's ban.

During the summit, Boric denounced Venezuela and Cuba and attacked Venezuelan immigrants in Chile. In an interview with Univisión he said, "I believe that no country has the capacity to absorb by itself a migratory flow as large as the one that has been from Venezuela," echoing the xenophobic attacks of the Chilean fascist right.

At the time of Boric's trip to Los Angeles, he earned high praise in the US corporate media as an example of a "responsible" Latin American leader. The Bezos-owned *Washington Post* assessed the first months of Boric's presidency as follows: "While Boric vowed to make Chile the grave of the Pinochet era's free-market economic model, he has so far shunned radical moves, appointing the current Central Bank head as his finance minister." The *Post* also noted that Boric has deployed the Chilean military to confront indigenous communities' demands for land reform, "reversing a campaign pledge" in order to "ensure basic security."

Boric's popularity has been plummeting since the spring, with opinion polls showing approval ratings sank from 50 percent in early March to 30 percent or lower in June. After 100 days in office, Boric's disapproval rating is nearly double that of his two predecessors, Piñera and Bachelet, during their second terms.

The international pseudo-left bears responsibility for Boric's election and his attacks on the Chilean working class. In particular, the Democratic Socialists of America promoted Boric as a leading light of socialism in the 21st century and sent delegations to campaign on his behalf during last year's election.

A December 16, 2021 statement by the DSA's "International Committee" declared that the DSA "now more than ever expresses its unconditional support for the left coalition Apruebo Dignidad, just days away from the historic second round of the 2021 Presidential elections. We hope the Chilean people select democratic socialist and former student movement leader Gabriel Boric as their next president."

The DSA praised Boric as "committed to ending the deep political and economic inequalities that mark Chilean society" and said a Boric victory would be a loss "for the entire neoliberal and neofascist model."

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